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ABSTRACT

This position paper explores the issue of violence in northern Canadian schools and personal perceptions and reactions to the violent events. Spindler's phrase "sociocultural contextualization" is viewed as placing and examining education and the educative process within the social and cultural environment of the community served by the school. The study was based on four assumptions: (1) violence in the school is reflective of violence within the child; (2) violence within the child is reflective of violence within the home; (3) violence within the home is reflective of violence within the community; and (4) violence within the community is caused by poverty, unemployment, a sense of communal failure, and a history of pervasive social injustice. Violence is not an ethnic issue, nor is it something that develops out of culture or heritage. Until and unless the social causes of violence are addressed, relationships among children in schools will continue to be reflective of those relationships that exist within the wider community. It is a moral imperative for society to do all that is possible to insure that those communities become viable places in which to live. (EH)

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THE SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXTUALIZATION OF EDUCATIONAL VIOLENCE : SOME REFLECTIONS ON NORTHERN EDUCATION

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

A paper presented to the
Society for Socialist Studies
at the
Annual Learned Societies Conference

University of Calgary
Calgary, Alberta

by

J. Tim Goddard
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Abstract

In this paper the issue of violence in northern schools is discussed. The argument is made that violence in the school is reflective of violence within the child, the home, and the community, and that this violence is caused by poverty, unemployment, a sense of communal failure, and a history of pervasive social injustice. Violence is not an ethnic issue, nor is it something which develops out of culture or heritage.

Until and unless the social causes of violence are addressed, relationships between children in our schools will continue to be reflective of those relationships which exist within the wider community. There is therefore a moral imperative that as a society we do all that is possible to ensure that those communities become viable places in which to live.

THE SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXTUALIZATION OF EDUCATIONAL VIOLENCE : SOME REFLECTIONS ON NORTHERN EDUCATION

Recently, violence in schools has been a subject for much media attention. On television and on radio, in the newspapers and the magazines, the stories continue to be reported, a veritable litany of horror and fear. It sometimes seems that contemporary Canadian schools have deteriorated into a violence which has never been known before.

And yet, is this such a new occurrence? Is educational violence simply a result of the television age, as some would profess, or is it reflective of a much deeper and more pervasive problem? That violence exists in schools is not an issue, nor is the reminder that it has so existed since the very beginning of a compulsory education system. What is at issue, perhaps, is the frequency and level of violence being experienced in contemporary schools.

As children, we all experienced bullying. Someone stronger, or bigger, or simply less caring, would seize the opportunity to make us give over our lunch money, step to the back of the line, miss school for fear of physical retribution for some real or imagined slight. We were aware of schools with a reputation to be rough, and we attempted to stay clear of those schools and of the surrounding streets. It is this connection which has, I fear, been ignored in much of the contemporary debate. Simply put, violent schools exist within, and may perhaps be a product of, violent communities.

In this paper I shall focus exclusively on the violence I have witnessed in northern Canadian schools. I have worked in a number of communities, with people drawn from a number of cultures. Cree, Dené, Inuit, Métis, white - all have attended the schools in which I have worked and/or which my children have attended. It is not my purpose to focus on any one particular cultural group or groups; no names will be reported, nor communities identified. Suffice it to say that violence is common in all northern schools, irrespective of the culture served by that school. What is at fault, I believe, is not the people who live in northern communities. Violence is not simply a way of life for northern peoples, nor is it some remnant of a hunter-gathering lifestyle. The fault does not lie with the victims of the violence. Rather, the fault is with the environment in which they live, the society in which they exist.

Sociocultural Contextualization

This term was coined by Spindler (1987) and refers to the placing and examination of education, and the educative process, within the social and cultural environment of the community served by the school. It is not sufficient for us to examine schools as though they exist on a petri dish. Schools are not simply complex structures which might be understood if only we had the correct instruments with which to observe, record, and

collect data for future analysis. The relationships which exist within the community of the school are reflective of, and intertwined with, the relationships which exist between members of the community served by the school.

When a student has a discussion with another student, they are not simply reacting to each other as students who behave in certain ways and who have certain reputations. Their discussions are also coloured by the ways their parents and siblings behave around the kitchen table, the ways their parents interact with each other and with other parents in public, the ways in which their respective siblings are interacted over the years. As teachers, it is important that we place the social interactions we witness within the classroom within the wider sociocultural context of the community.

The issue of educational violence is one which benefits from such a perspective. Indeed, this paper is predicated on a series of assumptions which intimately link the school with the community.

Four Assumptions

The assumptions which underlie this paper are that :

- violence in the school is reflective of violence within the child;
- violence within the child is reflective of violence within the home;
- violence within the home is reflective of violence within the community; and,
- violence within the community is caused by poverty, unemployment, a sense of communal failure, and a history of pervasive social injustice.

In accepting these assumptions, I am linking the social condition of the community with the social experiences of the school. It therefore follows that in order to make sense of violence in schools, we must first make sense of violence in the community served by the school. This is one of the reasons why policies developed at the system level are often so unsuccessful when implemented at the local level; there is simply no 'fit' between the policy and the community. As Clune (1991) has noted, successful policies must be "responsive to local context, influenced by embedded culture, both educational and social, and heavily impacted by race and socioeconomic status" (p. 126).

Although the notion of school culture and local context is beginning to receive some attention from educational researchers, few have addressed what Corson (1991) describes as the task of helping schools become "more organic to their community" (p. 7). Lister and Zeichner (1991) suggest that this is because the intellectual tradition of teaching has been one where teachers are conditioned to believe that "we can make a difference" (p. 90) to individual student development by isolating ourselves and our students from the harsh realities of the world outside the classroom. That this is not feasible has only recently become a topic of discussion.

A short story

I was sitting in my office. It was in the afternoon, about four-thirty, and most of the teachers had left for the day. The telephone rang. It was a student, Phil [not his real name], a grade 10 boy with whom we had been having some problems. He had had words with a young primary teacher, and had upset her enough that she had requested him to the office. He had been embarrassed and angry at the summons to meet with me, and had gone home angry and sullen. That had been two weeks ago, and he had not returned to the school. The guidance counsellor had informed me that the boy had gone out on the land, hunting or fishing, and that the boy's p...ents didn't know where he was. On the telephone I could hear loud music in the background. His words were slurred.

"I've got a gun. I'm going to shoot myself."

He was not loud, or shouting, or angry. I could hear tears in his voice.

"Why? What is the matter?"

I am not a counsellor. I've not been trained in this. I had no idea what to do, I just didn't want to hear gunfire.

"I'm going to shoot myself."

Repetitive. Still no reason, still too much noise.

"I can't hear you. That music is too loud. Why don't you come in to the office and talk to me?"

Now why did I say that? I don't particularly want an unstable 17 year old with a gun in my office.

"No. I'll turn down the music."

Loud. Calm. Silence. The music is turned down. Loud laughter. Sounds crazy.

"There. I've cut myself."

"Cut what?"

"On my knife. I can see the blood. Can you see the blood?"

"No. I can't see over the telephone. Where are you?"

"At home."

"At your house?"

"Yes!" Loudly. "At home. Not my house, my friend's house."

"Come to the office and talk to me. Or tell me which friend's house you are staying at, and I'll come there and visit with you."

"Nobody cares." Crying again, deep sobs, loud and hurt and angry.

"I care. But, how I can you know, if you don't come here and see. Come and talk. We can figure out what's going on. We can sort it out, but not over the telephone."

Silence.

A long silence.

"I'm coming."

The telephone goes dead. I hang up, and sit back.

I am sweating.

To cut a long story short, he came to the office. I had telephoned the police, but they were busy with another dispute. They asked that I call if he tried anything when in the office. He came at last, some twenty minutes after he had called. I was worried. I could not contact him, and I was scared that he had decided not to come. I sat, trying to look occupied, reading the same paper over and over again, pen poised as if to mark a passage. He walked in, hesitant, eyes still red and face streaked with tears.

He sat at the chair in front of my desk. I put down my pen. We looked at each other. Suddenly, he leaned forward across the desk, gripping the front of his shirt. He ripped it open, buttons bursting and rolling across the desk, small and white and round, the four holes wobbling in and out of focus as the button spun down. A knife in his hand.

"Look!"

Loud, a shouted command, an urgent plea? I didn't look at his chest, just at his eyes.

"Don't shout. I'm only here, not in ******* [the nearest community]."

He gazed back. Quiet now. He slowly placed the knife on the table. A paring knife, not too long a blade. Rusty.

"Look."

I saw the blood first, oozing from the cuts which crisscrossed his chest, like a series of tattoos. Once, in Papua New Guinea, I had seen the cuts of initiation, when marks representing the teeth of a crocodile had been etched into the back of a boy, then rubbed with a mixture of lemon juice and charcoal so that the scars would colour and rise up, permanent scars of an honourable rite. These cuts, I saw, were not deep. There were many, and the blood was fierce, but the skin would recover. No white of muscle was showing, no pumping blood to signify an arterial wound. They hurt, no doubt, but would not kill. Perhaps, then, this was a cry for help and not the real thing which I had feared.

We talked. Oh we talked, for two hours or more.

I interrupted once, to call my wife and explain that I would be late for dinner.

At last, calm, he left. I walked him to the door.

Locked it behind us.

Went home.

Had supper.

A year later I received a letter from a colleague who was still at the school.

Phil had finished grade 10.

Discussion

The preceding is but one example of the violence I have witnessed in northern schools. Phil was not a "bad" young man. He was not involved in drugs or alcohol abuse, he had loving parents who cared very deeply about him and his siblings. However, in the context of his community, he faced a lifetime of unemployment, of reliance on government handouts, and he had created against the future.

In most northern communities there is no industry, no place to earn a living. There are one or two stores which sell nearly all the goods the community requires. There may be a community office which employs a secretary, an airport which needs to be kept free of snow in the winter, a road or dock which must be kept in good repair. There is probably a health centre and a school, each of which needs janitors and other support staff. In the winter some young men might receive a few dollars for cutting firewood for the elderly, for hauling water from the lake, for hunting caribou for those unable to travel on the land. There are, however, no jobs in the sense of any long term careers. The only hope to achieve such a future is to leave the community, to travel to a southern town or city. This is not an option for most young adults.

In addition to the well documented fear of the metropolis held by those who have grown up in small towns, there is also the issue of ethnic identity. Pulu (1975) has shown how the Yup'ik people of northern Alaska considered the learning of English to be a reflection of their lack of Yup'ik-ness. In learning English, the young separated themselves from the old, who could not speak English. As the old people personified all that was true about the Yup'ik culture, this separation in effect meant that the young were no longer Yup'ik. Measured weaknesses in learning English, therefore, had no cognitive cause but were the result of sociocultural factors previously ignored by the testers.

The people of the north are members of a domestic minority, remaining within their own indigenous borders and yet existing separately from the majority culture. Ogbu (1983) has described such communities as members of an involuntary, or caste-like minority, for they have not chosen to be a minority group in their own country but have been forced into such a situation by the actions of others. In common with other Canadians, the inhabitants of northern communities seek a lifestyle which will allow them to support their families, achieve some degree of financial independence, and provide the best possible environment for their children. Unlike other Canadians, they do not have this opportunity within their own community. They are faced, therefore, with making a decision as to whether they should stay or leave their community.

There is a need for economic development in the north. The traditional resource industries of logging and mining are controlled by southern-based multinational companies.

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of the lack of a developed community
hich has developed over the past four decades will
alternatives. The federal and provincial
a variety of labour-intensive manufacturing
people would then have the opportunity to work
to meet the needs of themselves and their
self-worth in their work. Such companies would
economically self sufficient. The fiscal losses
those funds expended on family support and
enefits.

ized after he was 'swarmed' by a group of grade
y recess, for a whole term, in tears because of
boy who threw a chair across a gymnasium
all team. I have seen white children crying
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aces in which to live. It is only through addressing
ools that we shall be able to address the violence

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